

25 November 2020

Stats NZ
8 Gilmer Terrace
PO Box 2922
Wellington 6011

Tēnā koe

Re: Preliminary view of 2023 Census content

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a written submission on this consultation document.

Regional Public Health (RPH) is the public health unit for the greater Wellington region (Wairarapa, Hutt Valley and Capital & Coast District Health Boards). Our purpose is to improve and protect the health of the population in the greater Wellington region with a focus on achieving equity. We work with our community to make it a healthier and safer place to live. We promote good health, prevent disease, and improve the quality of life for our population.

The reason for this submission is to reaffirm the importance of access to high quality census data to adequately inform all aspects of life impacting on public health. The Ministry of Health requires us to reduce potential health risks and promote good health by various means, which includes making submissions on matters of importance to the communities we serve.

We are happy to provide further advice or clarification on any of the points raised in our written submission. The contact point for this submission is:

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Ngā mihi

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OVERVIEW

The public health importance of accurate and reliable census data for emergency preparedness planning, controlling disease outbreaks, and for addressing health concerns among vulnerable populations including the elderly, low-income, racial/ethnic minorities, and special residential groups (e.g. nursing homes) cannot be overstated. Valid census information is critical to ensure that policy makers and public health practitioners have the evidence needed to: establish incidence rates, mortality rates, and prevalence for the full characterization of emerging health issues; address disparities in health care, prevention strategies and health outcomes among vulnerable populations; and to plan and effectively respond in times of disaster and emergency.¹ The New Zealand census, has, as a (near) mandatory long-form census, contributed to planning and policy across all aspects of civic life, and informed many important decisions made by businesses, municipal and provincial governments, and non-profits. The statistical importance of robust sampling in particular has long formed a key basis, and served as a benchmark for a plethora of other surveys used in public health research and service delivery².

KEY ISSUES

RPH would like to specifically comment on the following key topics:

Census response rates

RPH recommends that additional supports, to assist people to complete their own census forms and ensure representation across the breadth of New Zealand's communities, be strengthened.

RPH commends the overall goal of the 2023 Census to deliver quality data, with significant investment committed to activities to lift participation and response rates across New Zealand, and with a focus on geographic areas and ethnic groups that have historically had lower response rates (particularly Māori and Pacific peoples). We note that following poor response rates from 2018, there is planning from the outset to “use a ‘combined model’ methodology that uses administrative records to include people who are missed by the census field collection”. While adding administrative data to inform gaps produced by lower response rates among these key demographic groups can generate reliable information, the noted additional support for people to fill in their forms, as well as connecting with communities around New Zealand, is particularly welcomed as this will help increase both representation in, and confidence using, census data. RPH recommends that obtaining this data directly from participants should be the prime focus and that additional supports for individuals and communities be strengthened to meet this objective. Ensuring assistance for those unable to participate in the census without assistance due to disability is particularly important. RPH concurs with the use of the same statistical units as in the 2018 Census without conceptual review, as this is particularly important for ongoing and future trend analyses and public health research.

Housing quality:

RPH strongly advocates for the retention of questions providing data on housing quality.

Research evidence on the impacts of healthy housing on health in New Zealand is extensive.^{3,4,5} As noted in the proposed census commentary, “Housing quality data can be used to develop initiatives to address

housing quality issues, inform public health action, and ensure that resources are targeted for maximum benefit. It also feeds into legislative requirements of councils, civil defence and emergency management planning, and measurement of severe housing deprivation.”

In the Wellington region, RPH partners with Sustainability Trust and Tū Kotahi Māori Asthma Trust to explore the experiences addressing housing needs in the region through education, and as a member of the Wellington Regional Healthy Housing Group is involved in research and advocacy to improve access to safe, affordable and healthy housing for all those in the greater Wellington region.⁶ The census provides invaluable data to inform our work, and any dilution of this data source would be highly problematic.

It would be useful to collect data indicating the accessibility of the New Zealand housing stock, especially in view of an aging population. While reporting of key elements from the census that contribute to an area deprivation score is extremely useful, a more direct reporting of the Deprivation score (as opposed to relying on secondary processing by Otago University) would aid alignment with public health research.

Smoking:

RPH recommends reconsideration of the omission of collection of information on e-cigarettes and vaping in the census.

While the incidence of smoking in most sectors of the community is reducing (working towards Smokefree Aotearoa 2025), smoking continues to contribute to health inequalities and mortality, particularly for Māori in New Zealand.⁷ There is fierce debate on the role of electronic cigarettes in reducing harm – with proponents who favour harm reduction advocating for their promotion⁸, while others urge caution as evidence of rising rates of e-cigarette use among New Zealand teens (with fears of nicotine addiction among a new generation of “never smokers”)⁹. There is also increasing evidence of lung damage due to vaping.¹⁰ RPH note some ambiguity in the wording related to the proposed question on smoking: “*The 2023 Census will continue to collect information only on tobacco cigarettes.*” This is despite “*forms of smoking other than tobacco cigarettes are becoming more relevant since the 2018 Census, with e-cigarette smoking becoming more common*” While other New Zealand surveys capture smoking behaviour, and particularly youth smoking/vaping behaviour, it would seem perverse to signal the growing importance of e-cigarettes and yet to omit reference to them in the census for 2023. In view of the result of the cannabis referendum, RPH supports the omission of any questions relating to the use of cannabis in the 2023 census.

The collection of new and updated questions on sex, gender, and sexual identity:

RPH welcomes the collection of new and updated questions on sex, gender, and sexual identity.

These questions “*better reflect diversity within New Zealand, allowing people to see themselves in the data and inform better decision making for and about sexual and gender minority groups*”. While noting that considerable consultation has informed the response options proposed for this census, these remain limited to very few potential responses – albeit with the ability to add self-definitions.

References

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